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The Democrativity of Applied Theatre and Performance Art

A couple of years ago, before I was aware of the theme of the IFTR Hyderabad conference, it dawned on me that performance research, at least the way I had studied it, had overseen a quite obvious paradigm in modernist theatre, namely that progressive theatre to a large extent seemed to have evolved not only in response to but with an impetus and a pursuit of democratization. In this presentation I will pursue a genealogy of performance art and applied theatre in virtue of an assumption that implies commonalities and links between these practices and in reference to progressive pedagogy. The rationale behind the assumption is that democratic incentives have been catalyzed via pedagogically adept philosophers, demagogues or activists since early modernism to responsive and progressive artists, who gradually turned the democratic modes of public opinion into applicable artistic practices and in some cases even methods. Without the democratic aim of radical pedagogy we probably would not have gotten performance art or applied theatre as we know it – and probably not artistic research either.

There are various noteworthy examples of transpositions from politics via pedagogy to performance, from first wave feminists in Sweden at the end of the 19th century through the 20th century. For reasons of time I need to focus on a particular lineage of progressive pedagogy and performance, so therefore I jump to the US in the early 20th century when John Dewey developed his philosophy of democracy and education, which positioned pedagogy in an active relationship with societal challenges and communal changes and opened up interactive relations between educators and students. A century before scholars of social movements suggested that participation is a school of democracy for empowering good citizens,¹ Dewey explicated a concept of education as a micro-democratic society that used participatory practices from agriculture to dramatic play and collaborative conflict resolutions (Dewey 1915). Behind Dewey's well-known pragmatism, often reduced to the slogan "learning-by-

¹ "Participation", says della Porta, "is a school of democracy: capable of constructing good citizens through interaction and empowerment" (della Porta 2013: 7).

doing”, he made serious attempts to justify pedagogy in terms of a scientific method – a methodology that assumes the form of a hypothetical deduction but branches out into an experimental performance rehearsed through a devising process. The so-called Dewey sequence starts with the recognition of a problem, followed by a contextualization and analysis of the same; in the next step students hypothesize a problem solution and thus go on to acting out possible scenarios and solutions through dialogue in an open-ended experimental fashion. This of course sounds like the blueprint for a devising methodology and was indeed the inspiration for experimental performance art as it was trialed and studied at the community college Black Mountain College in North Carolina where students combined community work and artistic practices and where John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Olsen and Merce Cunningham performed their so-called *Untitled events* in 1952, which, in turn, initiated a postmodern era of performance art in the United States and elsewhere. It is well known that Allan Kaprow was directly influenced by Dewey (especially his book *Art as Experience* (1934)).

I’ll get back to Kaprow in a minute, but let me first transverse over to the other performance practice I mentioned, namely applied theatre whose democratic legacy can also be traced back to an educational source. Paolo Freire is of course the Brazilian scholar who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and had a direct impact on Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). Freire’s pedagogy bears striking resemblances to Dewey’s philosophy; Freire’s so-called banking concept opposes an authoritarian learning process from teacher to student and instead favors dialogue between formative subjects in education. Just like Dewey, Freire proposes a methodological sequence that focuses on the experience and cultural background of the learner, who, regardless of previous education, can contextualize societal issues in dialogue with collaborators and consequently elevate explorations to a reflexive level and further onto a level of *conscientization* which is adopted to a praxis that can be acted out in the art of living a dynamic life in society. The fact that Dewey calls his pursuit democratic while Freire calls his liberational or revolutionary is just a contingent linguistic and geopolitical difference – their egalitarian philosophies have a

whole range of features in common, especially the ones that link progressive pedagogy and politics and that link would not be meaningful without the performative means of bringing the learning process into intersubjective actions in public life.

This is quite obvious in the case of Freire whose pedagogy was adopted directly into Boal's theatre practice. What is less known is Dewey's impact on performance art and I think this is partly due to the fact that he writes in a rather dry philosophical lingo that inclines towards broad issues in pedagogy, sociology and politics, but partly also due to the fact that performance art for a long time was conceptualized by art philosophers (long before RoseLee Goldberg) which inclined towards examples of visual arts rather than performing arts. This compartmentalization of disciplines and genres led to a half-century split between performance art and applied theatre in tertiary studies as well as practical projects. But the fact is that artists like Kaprow and Boal, for a long time unaware of each other, were influenced by a cognate pedagogical legacy and were practicing and justifying performance practices that were quite similar. The key connection between them comes down to participation, which I will soon address in my discussion about democracy.

Boal was of course also influenced by Brecht, who advocated a "theatre of the scientific age" which traces causes of conflicts beyond stage intrigues and, in line with Marxist doctrine, pursues the conditions and relations of production to find the source of conflicts – in particular economic causes. Hence he broke up the conventional language of the stage by multi-modal disruptions called *Verfremdungseffekt* and thus emancipated spectatorial reflections from the confines of the theatre as such. Boal was inspired by this and was well aware of Brecht's active interest in participatory theatre early on in his learning pieces (*Lehrstucke*), but ultimately Brecht does not go far enough as it is still "the dramatist, not the citizen, who chooses the word" and since "the wall between stage and audience did not come down." (*Theatre of the Oppressed*: XX)

The decisive step, or leap, for Boal was to abandon the stage and bring the theatre to the social conditions and economic sources of conflicts. “Should actors and characters go on dominating the stage, their domain, while I sit still in the audience?” Boal asks rhetorically and responds: “I think not. I think we could go much further: we need to invade! The audience mustn’t just liberate its Critical Conscience, but its body too. It needs to invade the stage and transform the images that are shown there. ... The members of the audience must become the Character: possess him, take his place – not obey him, but guide him, show him the path they think right. In this way the Spectator becoming Spect-Actor is democratically opposed to the other members of the audience, free to invade the scene and appropriate the power of the actor. With their hearts and minds the audience must rehearse battle plans – ways of freeing themselves from all oppressions.” (ibid. XX-XXI)

I think it is fair to assume that this leap beyond Brecht’s horizon would not have happened without Freire’s pedagogy. It is worth noting, however, that Boal was not the first theatre practitioner to transpose Freire’s pedagogy to theatre; adult educators in the so-called Laedza Batanani movement in Botswana used Freire as early as 1973 in outreach projects that would become known as Theatre for Development in postcolonial Africa – but that’s another story. [Develop monograph]

Let’s transverse back to the US for the sake of comparison and go back to 1966, when Kaprow wrote an essay called “Notes on the Elimination of the Audience”: In this text, Kaprow criticizes performance artists who insist on keeping the distance between performers and spectators and for shying away from striking out in “uncharted territories” (Kaprow, in Bishop: 102). He goes on to say that “it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do. This is simply accomplished by writing out the scenario or score for all and discussing it thoroughly with them beforehand. In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding or religious service. It is not even different from a play. The one big difference is that while knowledge of the scheme is necessary, professional talent is not; the

situations in a Happening are lifelike or, if they are unusual, are so rudimentary that professionalism is actually uncalled for. ..." (ibid: 103) Kaprow then describes various scenarios that call for spectators' participation in different ways: street theatre on a busy avenue, invisible theatre (without using Boal's term of course) and, finally, a site-specific performance that invites spectators to enact their normal communal roles as residents or something more specific.

Kaprow kept his aesthetics and methods close to the ground with his advice of "just doing" things. His happenings were less ideologically charged than Boal's performance practices, but were in themselves a reflection of the Black Mountain College experiments, which eventually led to the Fluxus movement, which, in turn, went onto trigger participatory concepts that were highly political, as, for instance, feminist performance (Yoko Ono, Guerilla Girls), anti-war manifestations (Living Theatre), institutional critique, and movements such as ACT-UP (die ins, innovative protests) in the 1980s and still later various forms of socially engaged art and activist performance as we could see in OWS. In terms of formal features it seems quite obvious that such events are arranged with improvised performance on a par with framed concepts and this dynamics between improvised acts and conceptual consistency can be traced back to the experimental performances and methodological procedures of Dewey's pedagogy. Repercussions of Dewey's pedagogy can also be associated with the educational turn (also called the curatorial turn) in museums and galleries and of course artistic research in higher education as well as the very validation of research in the UK in reference to the concept of impact. The juxtaposition of performance and concept also evokes a topical comparison with the ideological dichotomy of participatory and deliberative democracy. This combination is what della Porta (2013) perceives as a plausible survival of democracy: "In more recent social movements, the participatory practices have become intertwined with attention to a deliberative democracy oriented to creating multiple public spheres open to the construction of collective identities." (della Porta 2013: 186)

Boal's interactive theatre is easier to associate with so-called radical democracy, as propounded by Chantal Mouffe ((and Laclau) 1985; 2000; 2005). Boal inverts the order of the dramatic conflict in Aristotelian poetics and the conflict resolution of life crisis rites by leading a crisis to an ideal and premature resolution, only to repeat it by opening a breach in the conflict scenario and inviting people to suggest and enact ideologically conscious approaches to the crisis – which may or may not be possible to resolve within the forum. This model of open-ended conflict is a democratizing alternative to the normative consensus models in classical drama and ritual regimen where crises, liminal and transitory dramatizations, and the predictable reintegration back towards a social and political status quo. But it would not be entirely right to say that this brings Boal's poetics close to Mouffe's politics: what Mouffe expressed in terms of radical democracy in the 1980s, Freire had foreshadowed in his radical pedagogy in the 1960s, which the African Theatre for Development practitioners and Boal, in their turn, gave an embodied and ambulant dimension in the 1970s. It's important to give credit where credit is due and in this case I think it is fair to say that pedagogues and artists paved the way for a performance that integrated pivotal qualities of radical as well as deliberative and participatory democracy.

CONCLUSION

My overarching interest is to investigate how progressive theatre adopted democratic incentives in early stages of modern democracy (in the late 1800s) and, with help from progressive pedagogy, transformed such incentives over the coming century into applicable performance practices and methods. When we reach the 1970s there is plenty of evidence that various performance practices had become democratizing in their own right, which eventually crystallized into a critical mass in line with the performance art and applied theatre legacies. The decisive democratic factor in this development lies in the participatory ways of attaining performative effects in activist performance, such as affirmative claims of gender identities, alternative citizenship, identity corrections of neoliberal power players, prefigurative politics through occupations, and so forth. The decisive challenge for this kind of performance practice

is to adapt the performative effects to sustainable social and political processes. This is what I wish to call *democrativity*: a combination of performativity and adaptability for purposes of enhanced democratic participation through bottom-up approaches. (I will speak about this a bit more on Friday in a general panel.) How will that happen? I'm not sure. My guess, though, is that it will happen through a combination of progressive pedagogy and prefigurative performance, perhaps catalyzed through social movements in work places or in the public sphere, or perhaps through artistic research in the universities – or all of these places but through that combination.

(Do I have time to mention an example?)

A fifteen minute online video of the Swedish performance (dress rehearsal) is available here: https://vimeo.com/111840058?utm_source=email&utm_medium=clip-transcode_complete-finished-20120100&utm_campaign=7701&email_id=Y2xpcF90cmFuc2NvZGVkfDIhYTc4YzFiYjAwNWYwMmI1ODExZTE5YjBhZDAzYTU5MTY4fDI1MDYzMjg1fDE0MTU5NzQyMDR8NzcwMQ%3D%3D

Let me end with an example of a performance I made last fall called *Politico* in Gothenburg, Sweden and that drew on aspects of both performance art and applied theatre. It was staged right before the general election in 2014. I came up with the concept and wrote the script, whilst the artistic director of the theatre organization die Buhne, Birte Niederhaus, directed the show. The situation in Sweden resembled many other European countries: after the election for the European parliament in the spring of 2014, a right-wing Euro-skeptical party had gained momentum and was about to make further advances in the national election.

Our greatest obstacle, as with all political theatre, was to explore an emergent not to say urgent issue in the presence of an audience that would almost certainly share and just affirm our political views. So we turned it into a formal experiment which would make it impossible for spectators to simply look on, think and nod from their seats, to

speak with Boal.² The idea was to conduct a citizenship test to see how a democratic procedure could lead to anti-democratic results with the help of a tacit spectatorial agreement and a few manipulative tactics.

- Transported the audience to a subterranean national security site
- Retrieved the spectators security numbers
- Infiltrated the audience with actors who destabilized the theatrical process
- Made the citizenship test gradually more fascist within democratic bounds
- Guaranteed the fairness of a voting process by means of surveillance
- Made a national party win the citizenship vote and then played a pre-recorded victory speech that sounded just like a speech by the Sweden democrats but which was in fact a campaign speech by Hitler from 1933
- Singled out spectators with a foreign background (planted actors) to be expelled from Sweden, not only because of their vote for world citizenship but also their alleged criminal records that were accessed when the spectators gave away their security number in the beginning
- In the end the audience took action and intervened in the performance, without any instructions or agreements to do so. And so we got five very different ending to the performance.

On the opening night the audience started shouting to the actors and the event dissolved into a quite boisterous discussion. More commonly, though, the moment of arrest and eviction caused physical interventions from the audience. One audience simply walked up and obstructed the excluded person from being escorted out of the hangar. Another smaller audience, which was recorded for documentary purposes, walked out with the deportee, despite warnings about the consequences from the actors. Yet another audience were quite young and did not dare to disrupt the performance but engaged in a lively discussion on the bus ride back to Gothenburg.

² “Politics” cannot only be a matter of (re)converting the converted in performance space. (John Fletcher, “Identity and Agonism”, p. 193)

Ola Johansson

Middlesex University